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ABSTRACT

The development of a full-credit peer tutor training course for college freshmen is based on the assumption that respect for the writing student and respect for writing as a process are essential attitudes for peer tutors to acquire. Training begins with assigning tutors writing activities to make them more aware of themselves as writers and learners and more appreciative of the processes of composition. Readings from Peter Elbow's "Writing without Teachers" and Carl Rogers' "Freedom to Learn" and role playing as textbook reviewers serve to further the tutors' understanding of composition. With this respect and understanding, the tutor is able to make responses appropriate to individual needs of student writers, and examples of these responses are found in the research papers that tutors are required to write about their experiences tutoring students. Most notable in the tutors' research reports is reference to a changing dialogic relationship between tutor and writer. The tutor seems to be able to guide the student from a one-sided student-teacher dialogue to a more equal I-thou relationship that encourages the students' respect for themselves as writers and learners and enhances their ability to engage in academic discourse. (AEA)

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TRAINING PEER TUTORS FOR COLLEGE WRITERS: RESPECT, RESPONSE, DIALOGUE

> [As he moves] from the life of the senses toward the life of reasoned intelligence...the long sleep of man is interrupted and his self-consciousness, separating itself from the lazy play of the needless saga series of events, begins to think and to be thought of, 'itself by itself,' and as it thinks and is thought of, man in his new inner isolation confronts the phenomenon of his own autonomous personality.
>
> Eric Havelock, Preface to Plato

In his history of fifth century Greeks, Eric Havelock notes the simultaneous rapid growth of the use of prose writing and dialectical thinking, which profoundly influenced the consciouness of self he describes in this passage. We cannot say that either writing or use of dialectic is the cause and the other the effect; no doubt they reinforced and served one another. And, in some ways, the experience of college freshmen may be similar to the transition of those early Greeks: challenged to think in new ways by the dialectics of each discipline, their thoughts and expressions caught, examinined, and exposed by the web of their often insufficient prose, made conscious of the many selves of the writer, the freshman composition student is forced to rethink his world and himself. And, the internal and external worlds the student confronts, writes about, and creates are tentative, ambiguous, self-revealing. We should not lightly undertake this task of teaching writing. It requires individual attention.

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In many colleges, peer tutors can increase the amount of individual assistance available to students. But if the tutors are not trained, we may simply be allowing the blind to lead the blind (or in some cases the arrogant to lead the unknowing). To enhance the quality of peer tutoring at the college where I teach, I designed a full-credit course to train College Tutors in Writing. The course was based upon my belief that to help a Freshman learn how to write, a tutor must have respect for the student's difficult transition from oral to written modes of expression and for each student's attempts to involve himself in the varied and intricate processes of composition. This respect helps the tutor make responses that stimulate possibilities and assist the student's identification of attitudes, information, and patterns hitherto unrecognized. Respect and response lead to fruitful dialogues between tutor and writer, dialogues which acknowledge and shape the student's responsible written contributions to our communal body of knowledge.

Background

This course evolved from a not entirely successful first attempt ~~to train tutors~~ which focused upon teaching tutors methods and techniques without special attention to the tutors' attitudes.

When the first tutor training was offered (Fall 1978), I knew generally that I wanted the tutors to be listeners, supporters, and encouragers, not critics, correctors, and

editors. They were to help the student by talking with him in such a way that the student would develop his own content and ideas and discover an incentive to write and critique his own writing. The tutors were trained to respond to the writer using techniques I found in Terry Radcliffe's article, "Talk-Write Composition: A Theoretical Model Proposing the Use of Speech to Improve Writing"(1972) and Peter Elbow's Writing Without Teachers (1973). Elbow's recommendations, called "pointing, summarizing, and telling," give models for non-judgmental responses to a preliminary writing or first draft. Radcliffe's responses, suggested by counseling and communication theory, seem ideal to help the student develop content and ideas in a supportive atmosphere.

After trying these kinds of responses for a couple of weeks, the tutors complained that they seemed unable to help, that they had to "clean up the composition" before they could even begin to respond as suggested. Unfortunately, they were doing precisely what I didn't want: treating students with scarcely disguised contempt and editing papers.

To help the tutors understand the students' writing problems, I lectured to them about "the writing process," and we analysed problems and errors in students' papers. But, while the tutors could now understand--that is name, identify, even diagnose a student's writing difficulty--they were still unable to make many helpful comments.

I finally determined that what the tutors lacked was respect for the struggles of the beginning writer. I could ask them to use Radcliffe's and Elbow's responses, teach them

to identify errors, but if their responses were not motivated by respect for the learner and an understanding of the entire process of composition, their work was almost useless. In short, prior to skills and techniques, theories and methods, the tutors needed to develop an attitude of respectful concern, as well as an understanding, and the attitude had to come first.

As one of the tutors wrote at the end of the revised course (the one I am about to describe):

> The attitude of a good tutor is one of equality and concern toward the student as a person. The tutor has many methods to choose from, but it would be a horrid mistake...to use one method on all his/her students, or try to mold the student to fit the method. ...[T]he tutor must recognize each student as an individual who has specific needs.[1]

Respect

To develop respect, the revised training course begins with three experiences to make the tutor more aware of herself as a writer and learner and more appreciative of the processes of composition. During the first three weeks, we all do and discuss the following:

1. Each tutor writes an indivdual history recalling her education in composition to identify what she knows and how she learned it and to assess the positive and negative influences on her writing and on her development as a writer.
2. Each tutor writes a narrative account describing her most recent composing of an academic paper from the time she heard the assignment to the time she received the paper back from the teacher. The narrative includes actions and thoughts, as well as feelings and attitudes.

3. In class, we each compose a short essay, beginning with a variety of invention techniques including free-writing. Then, we read and respond to each other's ideas, purposes, and drafts, and proofread the completed essays. (The topic for this essay was Wallace Stevens' "Anecdote of the Jar." Any short poem, a painting, or mutual experience would serve.)

These three activities quickly acquaint the tutor with their own problems and achievements, and they become aware of different and similar modes of invention and discovery, of individual habits and styles. They begin to assess the value of different kinds of responses. Their attention is shifted away from writing as a product, away from editing and errors of mechanics, and focused on the earlier, germinal stages of compostion and the value of expressive writing from which ideas and purposes emerge. They see how judgments can limit imaginative insights. They learn through experience that writing involves a number of interrelated activities and that writing blocks and stilted prose often result when one tries to edit during the early stages of invention and forming.

Not surprisingly, their conclusions are similar to those reported in recent books and articles about composition, so I support and expand their discoveries by telling them about James Britton's participant-spectator theory of language, Janet Emig's study of the composing processes of twelfth graders, Josephine Miles' theories about predication and ideas, Mina Shaughnessy's work with basic writers, Linda Flower's

definitions of writer- and reader-based prose, and Roger Garrison's methods ~~to~~ for writing conferences. We read and discuss Elbow's Writing Without Teachers and Carl Rogers' Freedom to Learn (chapters 4-7, 11). They examine a standard Freshman composition textbook and write a book review assessing its ability to address the writing problems they have identified. The book reviews are written for the Freshman composition teachers (we discuss the implications of this particular audience), and after a revision or two, are copied and distributed. Using these texts we also review aspects of grammar they feel unsure about.

In addition, each tutor writes anecdotal reports of each conference with a student and keeps a journal of comments on her reading and development as a writer.

Response

These experiences and reflections, the support from professionals and review of traditional materials give the tutor the confidence to try out different responses when they meet with students. I ask them to be particularly aware of the kinds of responses they make to students because, as a final project, they will write a report based upon their own records. The report can be a case study tracing one or more students' development (including themselves) or an examination of several students' work during the invention or revision part of the composing process.

In these final reports, the tutors said that their most effective responses were those which established a

supportive and encouraging atmosphere by providing the student with an interested, non-judgmental reader and ~~that~~ which involved the student in the writing task. For instance, one tutor noted that, when responding to a draft, it is wise to focus on one writing problem at a time, and that the appropriate response is rarely correction or editing, but more likely a question. The question, "Can you give me an example?" is preferable to the comment, "You haven't supported your generalization."

One tutor noted that if she could discover and respond to the student's personal interest in a topic, then he was able to find a purpose for writing. Describing her work with a student writing about the history of farming, she wrote:

> While talking with [ ] I discovered that he had written his paper out of his own experience with farming, yet he only briefly mentioned this personal relationship with his topic in his draft. He was writing...without realizing that the history of his family was a history of farming, from the pioneering days of his grandfather to his own day of mechanization. Listening to his colorful description of his farm life, I thought, "How could his paper be so dull and objective when he is sitting here now drawing a marvelously vivid picture of the farming life he loves so well?"
>
> As soon as I found out that he had neglected this personal point of view, I suggested using it as a center...from which the paper could develop. ...What really surprised me was that in his next draft many of those smaller grammatical mistakes he was making in the first paper had mysteriously disappeared. ...His thesis was the same as in the first paper, but proving it through his own experience made it much clearer and much more interesting.[2]

Another tutor always began her discussion with a student by commenting on the positive aspects of the student's work before asking questions to elicit examples and details. Note how her questions to a student writing about Black Rights

lead him to the discovery of identifiable rhetorical structures, comparison/contrast and classification:

> His first writing was a free-write of all his feelings and ideas. I felt this was a good start and told him so. I then tried to direct my questions towards receiving more information on the subject. I said, "You talk about the differences between black and white schools; can you describe some of these differences? What were some of the specific problems your father encountered? You speak of emotions, but can you tell me which emotions you are talking about?"[3]

Next she helps him identify an audience to give the essay rhetorical purpose:

> I told[ ] to pretend he was writing to someone like me who came from an area with very few Blacks and so knew little about the situation. I figured by telling him that, he would remember our discussion and try to write as clearly as he spoke to me.[4]

The sequence of questions can often help a student proceed from description to analysis, from narrative or reporting to ideas expressing comparisons and contrasts or implications and consequences. When working with a student on an assignment to"describe, analyse, and draw some conclusion about a personal experience," the tutor began with Who? What? and Where? questions to develop narrative content; then she asked How? questions to ascertain qaulities, feelings, and processes; and finally she posed Why? questions to prompt analysis of motivation, cause and effect. During this questioning the student wrote down each answer and at the end had a sentence outline for his essay. After examining her own and the student's composing habits, this tutor concluded:

> The activity of questioning is often done internally and unconsciously by more advanced writers. More

> advanced students question and dialogue with themselves before they begin to write, or they free-write to bring those questions to light. This kind of activity is not internalized by Freshman writing students. Therefore, I always stress to students that what we do together to generate content can be done alone, in hopes that as they improve they will internalize some of the steps to good writing.[5]

Dialogue

The dialogue this tutor refers to is similar to heuristic procedures: the development of content and ideas by questioning, comparisons and oppositions. But besides heuristic dialogue, I believe other dialogic relationships exist between the tutor and the student which positively influence the student's writing. In most tutors' work, I can trace a progression from the dialogue of teacher to student, which Martin Buber identifies as an unequal relationship, to the mutuality of an I-thou relationship which can provide for the student's increasingly authentic exploration of his world.

Buber writes, "the relation in education is one of pure dialogue"[6] and describes the experience of inclusion when the teacher, or in this case, the tutor, out of her respect for the student's individuality, catches herself "from over there," feels how the other is affected, intuits the other's purpose. As one tutor wrote: "A good tutor does not simply go over student papers. She goes into them, into the experience of the student as writer, as person, to discover and generate meaning."[7]

According to Buber, the teacher or tutor in this kind of relationship comes to "an ever deeper recognition of

what the human being needs in order to grow. But he is also led to the recognition of what he...is able and unable to give of what is needed--and what he can give now, and what not yet."[7] As several tutors noted, they had to withhold information, practice a certain reticence, let the student write his own paper, find his own way. They had to temper their early desire to be completely involved in each step of the composition, to respect the student's emerging abilities. One tutor even refused to help a student with a theme at the end of the semester, telling her she knew what she had to do and could do it. They came to realize that they could teach the freshmen to be self-motivated writers and that that was their goal.

Buber's definition of the dialogical relationship in education is limited to the education of the younger student. He says that the young learner cannot and should not be expected or asked to extend himself to see or experience the world from the teacher's point of view. Thus, the I-thou relationship is always incomplete. But with college freshmen I think we can expect the possiblity of the student's experiencing of the world from the teacher's, or at least from the tutor's, perspective. And I think such an inclusion of this other's self develops a positive sense of audience and an expanded notion of responsible writing.

Because someone is listening and responding, the student dares to test his own purposes; he acknowledges the need to support his assertions; he is willing to consider other opinions, even conflicting ideas. This willingness depends

upon the student's assurance of the respect of the tutor and on the student's growing confidence in his own composing process and expression. Sustained by the authenticity of a tutor, the freshman writer may now approach the writing task with an increased sense of possibility. And rather than be overwhelmed by possiblity, ambiguity, and self-doubt, the writer comes to not only respect , but also delight in his own ability to create and express meanings.

Notes

1. Charlotte Stratton, The Path to Clear Thinking and Meaning (unpublished research report, May, 1979), p. 11.

2. Maureen Dolan, Shared Learning (unpublished research report, May, 1979), p. 3.

3. Barbara Maire, Talking Develops Better Writing (unpublished research report, May 1979), p. 3.

4. Ibid., p. 3.

5. Stratton, pp. 6-7.

6. Martin Buber, "Education (1926)," Between Man and Man (New York, 1965), p. 98.

7. Stratton, p. 7.

8. Buber, p. 101.

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